



## A Building with Vision

Lesley MacDonald  
Canadian National Institute for the Blind,  
Toronto, Canada

**Meeting:**  
**Simultaneous**  
**Interpretation:**

### 86. Libraries for the Blind

English, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

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Good morning ladies and gentleman. I am pleased to be here in Quebec City, representing CNIB in my role as the National Coordinator of Accessible Design Services. In particular I would like to thank Margret McGrory, Vice President, Information Systems, CIO and Managing Director of CNIB's Library, for inviting me to speak with you today.

I would like to start by providing you with an over view of CNIB in addition to statistics related to people living with vision loss in Canada. From there we will look at and discuss the concept of Universal Design. I will then provide you with a "Tour" of the new CNIB facility located in Toronto focusing on the Universal Design features incorporated into the building. The incorporation of the universal design features transform the CNIB centre into a building with vision. It is my hope you will be able to take some of our thoughts, ideas, in addition to lessons

learned and be able to adopt some of them into your own built environment spaces.

CNIB is a nation wide, Community–based registered charity committed to, research, public education and vision health for all Canadians.

Our mission is to be the leader in promoting vision health and enhancing independence for people with vision loss. There are more than 800,000 people in Canada who self identified themselves as living with significant vision loss according to Statistics Canada, Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2006 (PALS). One in eight Canadians over age 75 experiences a serious vision loss. The leading cause of significant vision loss in Canada is age related macular degeneration (AMD) with over 1,000,000 people diagnosed. Age related macular degeneration is also known as the leading Cause of vision loss in the developed world.

Universal Design is defined as the design of products and environments' to be useable by all, to the greatest extent possible. It is a broad spectrum solution that helps everyone not just people with disabilities. Universal Design, accommodates seniors, children, people with vision loss and others who are average. There are other terms that are used in conjunction with Universal Design such as "Inclusive Design" and "Design for All". These two terms essentially mean the same as universal design the terms vary in use from country to country. These three terms are all based on the belief that the broad range of human ability is ordinary and not special.

There are also other words that you may have heard of such as "Barrier Free" or "accessible design"; these words mean something quite different from Universal Design. "Barrier Free Design" or "Accessible Design" often results in separate and stigmatized solutions, for example a

building may be considered to be "Barrier Free" however the only entry available into the building for a person in a wheelchair is at the back of the building or there could be two sets of doors at the front of a building, with one door that utilizes an automated push button to open the door and the other requiring a person to pull the door open. The solution to make this building entrance universally accessible would be to incorporate a sliding front door that automatically slides open when the motion detector is activated. This solution allows everyone to enter the building by the same door.

## **CNIB Centre**

I would now like to share with you some of the background behind the actual development of our new building.

The CNIB's new facility is the result of many years of dreaming, a few years of planning and development and 16 months of construction leading up to occupying the facility in the fall of 2004.

## **New slide**

- When our original facility was built in 1954 the site was on the outskirts of Toronto. The pedestrian bridge followed shortly afterward and a separate national training centre was built in the 1960's.
- The old facility was built at a time when Architecture was sprawling and space, property and energy were inexpensive.
- Our building was designed with the needs of the CNIB of that time. Services and programs practiced what was

common until about 20 years ago, segregation of those who had a disability.

- We had sheltered work programs, including a broom-making shop, Piano tuning training, Basket weaving, Chair canning, catering, even a separate residence for seniors who were blind and a National Education Centre where people came from all over Canada to receive instruction in rehabilitation all of these services were housed on our old facility.
- We outfitted our building with furniture that created a flexible and open concept layout that has created a wonderful and friendly work environment that promotes team work. All the furniture is accessible, as we wanted a person who might have a disability to be able to work at any location as opposed to having a few work stations that were accessible and fitting people into those stations. By having all the work stations accessible a person with a disability can work at any spot.
- The primary goal of our new facility was to offer a safe and comfortable environment for people with vision loss, staff, clients, visitors or volunteers in an environment where all aspects of the facility are sensitive to everyone's abilities.
- We also wanted to demonstrate to architects, engineers, designers, building owners that universal design was cost effective and simple and we also wanted to be able to use our building to show people what could done to make their buildings accessible.
- As an Architect begins to design a new building, one **starts with a clean sheet of paper**...there is no reason that **the front door** cannot be positioned at

grade. No step, curb or stair between the inside and the outside worlds. But how many times do we see a flight of stairs...a barrier...to the front door.

- Apply this simple example to the whole building. Take a bit of considered thought. Create a building where its occupants, regardless of their ability, can explore space and have the comfort to navigate freely throughout the space.
- Clues such as texture, sound, layout, aroma, colour and light become valuable qualities of the Architecture. We wanted to make sure that we didn't create environment that is too guarded and prescribed. As this is not a reality outside in the community.
- There are large bodies of material and construction examples and mandatory building **codes and regulations** in Canada. However we wanted our building to go beyond these codes and regulations, to be able to show case what can be done to really make a building univerrrsally accessible as at the time the prevailing codes did not necessarily address all our unique requirements.
- In June the province of Ontario unanimously passed a new law the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability ACT 2005. The passage of this new law means that the province of Ontario will be fully accessible within the next 17 years. This includes not just the built environment but all areas such as customer service, communication, transportation and employment. The ultimate goal is to have all the provinces adopt a similar law.
- Legislation is one way and an important way to invoke change having voluntary compliance just doesn't seem to work at least in Canada. Our new building is now

being used as a model for the government to show case what can be done to make a building accessible.

- Behind each and every one of the accessibility features is a simple idea – we wanted our consumers to immediately feel comfortable, so that they can quickly feel at ease and benefit from our services.
- Some of the features are enormous and obvious while others are subtle and not as noticeable. A noted Architectural critic Christopher Hume, of the Toronto star; wrote in a Toronto local newspaper “the building is extraordinary in its ordinariness.” At first I wasn’t sure about the quote but I believe it reflects exactly what we hoped to achieve; in that the building does not look really like any other building just because it has incorporated universal design features into it. As so many architects often shy away from including universal design features as they feel it may detract from creating an aesthetically pleasing environment

I would now like to invite you to take a tour with me of our building, through the use of a power point slide show to highlight the accessibility features we have incorporated.

## **Slides**

As you can see our building sits a top an embankment overlooking a busy street, on the west side and the north side overlooks a ravine of wild deciduous and pine trees.

Pedestrians to the building using the overpass bridge continue along a covered path that has direct connection to the main entrance. All visitors to the building arrive by foot taxi, car, or bus and enter the building by a safe and secure series of paths and sidewalks and every one enters the same entrance.

- The building's simple structure, at 90 degrees to the pedestrian overpass across Bayview Avenue and with its central large hallway (wide enough to allow two people and a guide dog to pass easily) provides a convenient starting point for finding your way.
- The building's wonderful use of natural light gives clients with limited vision the maximum opportunity to see their surroundings.
- This is especially evident as soon as clients walk through the main entrance, which is immediately adjacent to the CNIB Library and the technical aids store.
- Clients can just as easily venture between floors with the aid of the talking elevators. And in case of an emergency, the talking fire alarms will calmly alert them of danger.
- Offices and meeting rooms are also easily identified with unique signs that include an angled Braille display ledge for easy tactile reading - a first in Canada.
- Other design features are far more subtle, but just as important.
- For example, the reception desk has two counter heights, as does the counter at the technical aids store – one at standing height, the other to receive clients in wheel chairs.
- We outfitted our building with furniture that created a flexible and open concept layout that has created a wonderful and friendly working atmosphere. All furniture is also accessible as we wanted a person who might have special needs to be able to work at any

location. We didn't want to just have a few work stations that were accessible and essentially not ghettoizing people with unique abilities.

- Contrasting colours on stairway handrails and varying floor textures along stairwells also ensure safe navigation.
- You can even hang your coat in the closets at different levels, on contrasting rails.
- Talking signs
- Clients can come in and can request a small electronic device the size of a remote control.
- This device will trigger audio messages throughout the building - a guiding voice to help them get where they want to go.
- Clients will be informed of where they are in the building, what is located around them, and useful daily information, such as that day's menu in the café.
- Tactile maps of each floor are placed near the elevator doors and at the front reception desk.
- Outdoors, the intersection from Bayview Avenue is equipped with an Accessible Pedestrian Signal for safe crossing, including a tactile component for deafblind clients.
- The pedestrian overpass above Bayview provides safe passage over the road to clients and staff taking the bus. And design concepts are being drawn up to give this landmark a facelift – both in terms of its appearance and its accessibility.



- A new Fragrant Garden is once again blossoming. Positioned to be drenched in sunlight and protected from noise, it is a tranquil sanctuary for both staff and clients
- Flower planters are raised so that the leaves and flowers are within easy reach.
- So subtle are some of the accommodations that you may wonder what the difference is. Inexpensive and simple – particularly when incorporated in the beginning rather than retrofitting a building latter

### **Slide Show of Building**